Aural Spatiality and Sonic Materiality

Aural Spatiality and Sonic Materiality: Attending to the Space of Sound in Performances by Ivo Dimchev and Alma Söderberg

Aside from audio-based performance work, the topic of sound and listening in theatre and performance studies has, as Patrice Pavis notes, 'tended to *serve* the visual arrangement or design'.[1] Attempts to account for how aurality operates are evident in Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner's edited volume on *Theatre Noise*. Furthermore, Ross Brown's research into the soundscape as a dramaturgical tool within postmodern theatre, drawing on Joachim Ernst-Berendt's notion of '*ear-thinking*', is worth noting as a significant contribution to the field.[2] More recently in *Theatre and Aural Attention*, George Home-Cook investigates the act of listening to reconsider the phenomenology of sound and understand theatrical attending. By associating attention with stretching, making use of the work of P. Sven Arvidson, Home-Cook argues aural attention as a dynamic inter-subjective act, one which requires an embodied mode of participation.[3] In this article, I address the need for an embodied, phenomenological approach to thinking and writing about aural attention as articulated in the work of Home-Cook, yet I focus on the *relationality* between the performer and spectator as the field of investigation.

In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann draws attention to sounds on stage and signals the emergence of an auditory semiotics.[4] In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Erika Fischer-Lichte highlights how artists, since the performative turn of the

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[1] Patrice Pavis, Preface in *Theatre Noise: The Sound of Performance* ed. by Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. xi. Emphasis in original.
[2] Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *The Third Ear: On Listening to the World*, (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1988), p.49. Emphasis in original.
[3] George Home-Cook, *Theatre and Aural Attention* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
[4] Hans Thies-Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006).

1960s, have developed many methods to draw attention to the 'performative generation of materiality', in which sound plays an important role. [5] Furthermore, Fischer-Lichte highlights one of the main tenets of the theatrical experience, namely that 'theatre is constituted not just through sight (*theatron*) but always also through sound (*auditorium*)', indicating an appreciation of sound's role beyond its relegation to the support of design elements.[6] By using the term 'tonality' to encompass all audible sounds within the auditorium that might influence the aural quality of the performance, 'music, speech, human noises, accidental sounds, and so forth', Fischer-Lichte foregrounds an understanding of aural space, she cites John Cage's seminal work, *4'33* (1952).[7] The sound of the piano lid closing, in David Tudor's rendition, the artist's steps combined with the sound of the wind, rain and the discontented murmurings of the audience create tonality. Fischer-Lichte notes that the constitution of aural space, in turn, cultivates the attention of the audience. From this, she theorises that 'the aural space dissolves the boundaries of the performative space'.[8] In this article, I pursue recognition of the co-constitutive nature of theatre as both an aural and visual environment. In doing so, I focus on the potential of the aural to alter the performative space and generate a relationship between the spectator and performer. I thereby develop a theorisation of aural space influenced by tonality and structures of attention.

Sound as Tangible Sensation

Much literature on sound ignores its role within theatre and performance studies. Theatre scholars, such as Mladen Ovadija and Adrian Curtain, are keen to identify the Futurists and

[5] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. by Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 76.
[6] Ibid., p. 120. Emphasis in original.
[7] Ibid., p. 212.
[8] Ibid., p. 124.

Dadaists as the forerunners of acoustic art. Yet there is generally little, or no consideration for how sound might contribute to the mood, tonality, or atmosphere of the theatrical context. Musicologist, Victor Zuckerlandl in *Sound and Symbol* puts forward several arguments for the dynamic qualities of aural space, foregrounding the potential of both tone and hearing as ways to encounter, what he describes as, the otherwise invisible and intangible parts of the world. Attention to aurality, Zuckerlandl claims, enables sensitivity to the surrounding environment; one that cannot be divided or measured. Auditory space, he indicates, offers 'a transition from a static to a fluid medium', highlighting how hearing can bring attention to immaterial, dynamic and non-measurable forces.[9] My approach in this article is framed by this understanding as I attend to, and document the operation of such forces in the work of Ivo Dimchev and Alma Söderberg.

Within sound studies, previous work has tended to focus on the physical acoustic properties and processes afforded by sound. Rick Altman in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* recognises how sound, in its heterogeneous nature, has much to offer the event-orientated aesthetic. Indeed, Altman calls for 'a vocabulary and methodology appropriate to the complex materiality of sound', criticising the shortcomings of existing models of analysis to account for sounds phenomenality.[10] Despite calling for a more phenomenal approach to sound which might enable an appreciation of 'sound's existence as both event and narrative', Altman continues to offer an account of the physical processes which occur when we hear.
Barry Blesser in *Spaces Speak Are You Listening?* draws attention to our lack of knowledge about aural space, claiming that our understanding of phenomenological and experiential processes of aural architecture are limited. Blesser, keen to indicate the 'intangible,

[9] Victor Zuckerlandl, *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World,* trans. by Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p.277.
[10] Rick Altman, *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.19.

experiential boundaries perceived by listening', uses the term acoustic arena to foreground the area within which it is possible to hear a sonic event.[11] Blesser deploys the term to describe the temporary community formed by the sonic event. The emphasis on the spatial experience of the attentive listener enables Blesser to encourage an apprehension of space demarcated by experiential attributes, rather than physical boundaries. Following Blesser and Altman, I develop a methodology to attend to the phenomenal experience of sound, cultivating a practice of attentive listening, one which recognises the listener as a key figure in the apprehension of aural spatiality.

In *Listening*, Jean-Luc Nancy generates a positive model for a philosophy that explores ontological and epistemological possibilities of sound, music and listening in relation to the human body, considering each as modes in which we co-exist together in the world. Nancy suggests that through sounding and listening to one another, the more bounded binaries of "man" and "subject" might be suspended, as he conceives of the body as an echo chamber with skin stretched across that reacts and vibrates in relation to other bodies and to the sounds around us. I focus on Nancy´s understanding of listening as a phenomenon which occurs on and through the body to consider how sound might operate in the depths of presentation, rather than on the surface as representation. I consider how sonic materiality might accumulate within spaces, across and through bodies, thereby affecting our relations and experience of the world.

Writing the Live Encounter

[11] Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, are you Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture,* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), p.21.

I recognise the possibility for a writing practice to address and expose relations operating via an aural dynamic. Salomé Voegelin uses a writing practice that not only seeks to embody her argument, but also makes a strong claim for listening as a process and form of criticality, opening writing itself up to the potential of listening's intangibility. In *Listening to Noise and Silence*, Voegelin notes the inadequacy of critical discourse to account for sound, claiming that it 'assumes and insists on the gap between that which it describes and its description'.[12] Such an approach, she contends, holds the object of study at a greater distance as though favouring that which is made evident. As an alternative, she argues for a listening practice that operates as 'the generation of the unexpected', a mode of engagement which she claims is intrinsically linked to a specific language that contests the habitual discourse more commonly associated with sound.[13] To counteract the challenge of writing about sound beyond attempts to contain or harness it, Voegelin uses the subjective 'I' to narrate first-hand experiences of sound works as writer-listener. In doing so she exposes the unstable, shifting nature of sound, embracing a 'critical language not as a structural system but as a sensorial material'.[14] As Voegelin points out, critical discourse 'is the very opposite of sound, which is always the heard, immersive and present'.[15] Following Voegelin, I develop a writing style to incorporate the subjective experience of attending to two theatrical events. Rather than holding critical discourse at a distance, I aim to bring out criticality from within the work by attending, through writing, to the rhythm and mood of each performance. My emphasis is on *how* such experiences take place and *how* space and atmosphere affect bodies and objects as the performance unfolds in the moment of encounter between performer and spectator.

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[12] Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Sound and Silence: Toward a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2010), p.xiv.
[13] Ibid., p.17.
[14] Ibid., p.108.
[15] Ibid., p.xiv.

My first-hand experience of each piece as a listening-spectator provides the motivation for this article and the development of a methodology which attends to how each performer uses their body, voice and objects to foreground space and materiality. The two performances have been selected from a larger corpus of work. The decision to discuss these two pieces together arises from an interest in how both artists use rhythm, vibration and movement. Ivo Dimchev's *Lili Handel,* uses dance (including butoh), operatic singing and incomprehensible phrases to create the essence of a diva unable to admit that her time is over. Initially performed in 2004 at the House of Dance in Stockholm, the piece has been shown more than 300 times and toured extensively to more than 70 countries including the UK, Hungary, Croatia and the USA.[16] Dimchev, born in Bulgaria in 1976, is an actor choreographer, dancer and performance artist trained in butoh and opera singing. He is the founder of several organisations including cultural organisation NeMe Humarts and exhibition space, Mozei both in Sofia and the Volksroom in Brussels. Alma Söderberg's *TRAVAIL* uses newspaper cuttings to create rhythmical sequences using movement, voice and song along with small percussion instruments, live beatboxing and dry ice. Söderberg is a choreographer, performer and musician. She grew up in Sweden, studied flamenco in Spain and graduated from the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) in 2011. She currently works in Brussels, is part of Manyone, a collaborative support structure funded by the Flemish Community and a member of John the Houseband, a musical assembly of performers and choreographers.

Here I write about each piece in turn, to do so, I adopt Mieke Bal's concept of the theoretical object, a strategy to articulate thought about art which privileges the art form uncovering how artworks compel, entice and motivate thought as dialogical partners.[17] Bal claims that

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[17] Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.xii.

'instead of being a substitute, a good text about art is a *supplement* to it'.[18] Where Bal focuses on the visual experience, through close looking, I concentrate on the aural experience through a process of close listening, as I write in the space between the spectator and the performer, thereby articulating my experience of attending to the two selected practices. In doing so I examine the potential of sound to produce space and the possibility of performance to foreground sonic materiality. I argue that attention to the aural environment of space can encourage sensitisation to the affective forces, or what Alfred Whitehead calls 'affective tone' or 'mood', a sensation we find ourselves caught up in, rather than one we might seek out. [19] Such an approach is in line with Gernot Böhme's objective to develop a way of accessing the environment that is the antithesis of semiotic discussion, privileging instead the sense of atmosphere, or lived experience as a mode of meaning-making. Böhme indicates how 'the aesthetics of atmospheres shifts attention away from the "what" something represents to the "how" something is present'.[20] In this sense, the emphasis is on the mutual exchange of energies and attention shared or felt within a certain environment. Indeed, it is this mode of *participation* occurring through the body of the spectator as a felt or lived experience within and across the performance event that I pursue.

Aural Spatiality: Ivo Dimchev's *Lili Handel*

February 2013, I am in Bristol for *In Between Time* international festival of performance. I enter the main auditorium at the Arnolfini and take my seat. There is one old armchair dimly lit centre-stage, and a short red velvet curtain, reminiscent of those found in traditional

[18] Ibid., p. xii. Emphasis in original.
[19] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), p.176 and p.246.
[20] Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* ed. by Jean-Paul Thibaud (New York: Routledge, 2017), p.43.

proscenium arch theatres, hangs several metres off the floor, gathered in at the centre by a curtain tie. From somewhere along the left-hand side of the seating bank, a tentative high-pitched voice becomes audible, singing an unknown, undecipherable opera song. The sound of the voice fills the minimally furnished space with a materiality that almost unites the objects, providing a background that aurally activates the scene. At this point, the voice itself cannot be placed despite attempts to localise it. Audible but unseen, it sounds neither male nor female. Altman states that in the theatre 'we never have any doubt whatsoever about who is speaking. Our ears tell us', here, temporarily devoid of a visual reference, the voice resounds almost eunuch-like in its extraordinary exhibition of depth and range. [21] This underscores Steven Connor's observation that sounds are always embodied, 'though not always in the kinds of bodies made known to vision'.[22] The untethered vocals fill the auditorium, pricking up my ears and occupying the previously empty sonorous space of the theatre environment. Between the source and my listening, sound establishes itself, unravelling and layering the room with a thick materiality. I strain from my seat, keen to match the vocals to a body, to anybody; I scan the seats close to the left wing to no avail. The sound activates a sense of ambiguity as the voice arouses anticipation, affecting the bodies of those present, opening a sonorous environment in which I can imagine other possible bodies liberated from what might be their objective actuality.

Gradually, a tall, pale figure (Lili) becomes visible, emerging from the half-light, taking short, unstable steps towards the centre of the stage, cautiously moving on black heels. The surface of Dimchev's skin is painted white, evocative of Japanese butoh and indicative of his training. The only other colour visible is evident on his bright red lips. Dimchev's scantily-

[21] Rick Altman, *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p.22.
[22] Steven Connor, 'Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art' Tate Modern, 21 February 2003 <http://www.stevenconnor.com/earshavewalls> [accessed 31 August 2017].

clad body dressed in a short, black feather jacket and thong, absorbs my attention. Miniscule motions operating on and beneath the skin's surface seem to manifest a sonorous materiality. In changing the scale of my attentive focus, I'm seized by the almost visible vibrational dynamic evidenced in the micro-rhythmic oscillations of Lili's epidermis. Connor has noted,

> Sound is imagined in the same two-sided way as skin: both as that which touches and that which is touched; both a medium through which we feel and as something that is itself subject to touching and assault.[23]

For Connor, it is important to consider sound *with* touch. Sound is contingent with its surroundings, by what it comes into contact with, it therefore transpires that 'we hear […] the event of the thing, not the thing itself'.[24] Dimchev's pale quivering body is detectable not only in contrast to the black walls of the studio space against which his highlighted skin seems to extend, but also as a sensation more readily grasped in the atmosphere evoked by his arrival in the space. This furnishes an apprehension of the conditions within which the sound is heard, providing an example of what Connor describes as 'the qualities of measure', more specifically 'shape, distance, space, volume and texture' as well as 'pitch', understood as 'all the sensations of weight, force, tension and balance'.[25] Dimchev's incorporation of butoh focuses my attention on the space, inviting me to look beyond what is presented on the surface. According to Bonnie Sue Stein, butoh has traditionally been used to focus Westerners' attention, captivating an audience through the use and manipulation of direct and raw emotions. Kazuko Kuniyoshi observes that 'butoh acts as a kind of code to something deeper, something beyond themselves. What is crucial to this code is its nonverbal nature'.[26]

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[23] Steven Connor, *Edison's Teeth: Touching Hearing*, (Morelia: Mexico, 2001), p.6.
[24] Ibid., p.3.
[25] Ibid., p.2.
[26] Kazuko Kuniyoshi, *An Overview of the Contemporary Japanese Dance Scene*, (Tokyo: Japan Foundation,

Dimchev's skin initiates and unfolds as a vibrational event that seems to stretch beyond the confines of his body into the room and out towards the audience.

The vibrational quality of Dimchev's skin foregrounds the relation between materiality and spatiality in a generative manner, one that avoids the apprehension of matter as fixed space. Instead, the vibrational quality that emerges could be argued as one able to bring new spatial forms into being, prompting a consideration of the material relations operating between performer and audience across the space. Dimchev's micro-movements might be considered as beginning to establish what Jean-Luc Nancy describes as a sonorous body where 'to sound is to vibrate in itself or by itself'; yet, 'it is also to stretch out, to carry itself and be resolved into vibrations that both return it to itself and place it outside itself'.[27] The body as a fixed boundary is brought into question. Following Nancy, the body therefore not only sounds and resounds for itself but is also able to affect the body of another through the event of vibration produced in the space. In this case, it is the audience-as-listener who, in listening, becomes affected by the movement and felt micro-oscillations of sound. Through its vibrational qualities, Dimchev's body extends into the space as miniscule recurring movements imperceptibly reach towards and envelope those present. The body is foregrounded as a mutational surface exuding an *expressively* tactile dimension, altering and manipulating the ambience and affective tonality of the space.

The skin's surface does not guarantee containment, evident here with the aid of white body makeup which makes Dimchev's skin deliberately stand out. Erin Manning in *Politics of Touch* draws attention to how 'skins *are* mutations continuously altering the limits of our

Office for the Japanese Studies Centre), 1985, p.6.

[27] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p.8.

engagement with the world'.[28] Manning states, 'skins do not need "external" markings to express their mutability', she claims all bodies extend without the apparent visual boundaries we are accustomed to recognise.[29] The porosity of Dimchev's skin highlights its potential as a permeable boundary, altering and affecting the relation with his surroundings. Though not a literal 'touching', the vibrational qualities bring our bodies into contact. This occurs as a barely perceptible act. We mutually reach towards each other as though forging stage and auditorium into closer proximity thereby emphasising our being-*with* and being-*together*. If skin here is conceived of as a relational surface, rather than as an envelope, our co-presence as performer and audience might be considered to contribute to the performative space. The porous nature of our skin as a responsive organ; one that reacts and responds to its surroundings as well as its vibratory potential, though barely detectable, therefore, when attended to becomes a site for our shared relation. Throughout the piece, the character of Lili unfolds in relation to an evolving spectrum of gestures, sounds, objects and snippets of well-known songs. In the opening scene, a sped-up version of Little Richard's *Tutti Frutti* plays overhead as Lili rhythmically moves to and fro. Almost imperceptibly, the movement gains momentum. Lili stands as though reacting to the external sonorous stimulus. The words of the song have been distorted and are barely audible. After a short while, he ceases the movement, turns back around and almost creature-like lip synchs to the lyrics as though speaking a language distinct to ours. The music persists; this time the body no longer joins in with the rhythm and pace of sound. Lili remains still, jarring the previous image, as though now unperturbed, outside of and able to resist sound's affective pull. He alternates between being inside and outside a common rhythm that seeks to govern his body and its movements, as attention is drawn to sound's affective potential and relation to the body. With no linear

[28] Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch, Sense: Movement, Sovereignty*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p.112. Emphasis in original.
[29] Ibid., p.112.

progression, fragments of narrative and tableaux reveal echoes and layers of the life of a sometime diva. Variations of a figure are presented, one not foreclosed by meaning yet made flesh in response to the dynamisms of sound. Dimchev's emergent presence speaks *with* all that it encounters, exposing a vibrational body resistant to pre-made categorisations, instead revealing a vessel in constant flux *open* to all that it touches.

The portrayal of a variety of characters that emerge in relation to rhythms, each with a distinct vibrational texture, sensitises us, as audience, to the potential of rhythm as a force outside of its relation to a numerical scheme. Such thoughts on rhythm will be returned to in my discussion of Alma Söderberg's *TRAVAIL*. This pastiche of forces is reminiscent of Francis Bacon's paintings of deformed bodies, described by Bacon himself as "orders of sensation".[30] In his writing on Bacon, Gilles Deleuze states that 'there are not sensations of different orders, but different orders of one and the same sensation'.[31] In his paintings, Bacon does not represent sensations but seeks sensitivity to sensation itself, thereby connecting different zones of the body and inviting a consideration of the artwork as a combination of sensations and rhythms. Similarly, it seems that Dimchev is inviting a consideration of sensations, not appealing to perception yet encouraging and enabling attendance to the distinct shades and textures of sensation palpable on the body and within the event itself. Throughout the piece, Dimchev's body reacts in relation to its surrounding environment, the breath, pre-recorded sounds or gaze of the audience; it is a body on show, one that takes up unusual, unrecognisable positions, a becoming body that emerges as though a function of resonance or as Nancy states, 'a resonance chamber or column of beyond-meaning'.[32] As

[30] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* trans. by Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003), p.36.

[31] Ibid., p.37.

[32] Nancy, *Listening*, p.31.

soon as it can be placed, it shifts, disrupting what we think we know about it. In adopting forms that reflect or embody sound's dynamic potential, Dimchev has in turn affected and shaped the sonorous environment that we have collectively inhabited throughout the duration of the piece.

Between the opera diva and butoh-esque body a variety of possible worlds and characters are grasped through sound, voice, rhythm, vibration and movement. Together, we inhabit these textures as lived experiences of bodies whose potential actuality is expanded through the sonorous. By listening to the layers of sound, it becomes possible to be immersed in the world of the theatrical environment outside of the physical limitations of the space. The use of props, staging and lighting, despite being minimal, help to reinforce this. It is therefore through the voice and sound that I shift from the actuality of the room towards an imaginary space built from the possibilities offered by our sonorous relation. In Dimchev's work we become aware of how a relation between stage and auditorium is established across and through the bodies of those present. Dimchev's body has been foregrounded as a surface for the relation between audience and performer. Sound and vibration have drawn attention to the body, skin and voice as the site for this relation as it has sounded and resounded across and within the space of the auditorium. The treatment of objects and the manipulation of aural expectations indicate how other bodies unfold in a relation *with* the other. From the outset, as audience, I have been encouraged to turn an ear towards the stage, making myself aurally attentive to the evolving nuances of Lili's character. In this sense, I argue that the audience are aurally co-constitutive of the performative space as listening is considered as a kind of touching in an act which involves a mutual and almost imperceptible reaching towards each other.

Dimchev's *Lili Handel* has indicated how aural attention might be mutually cultivated through a vibratory relation. Within the articulation of this theoretical object, the sonorous relation stemmed from the trained body of the performer out into the space towards the audience. Both the absence of a narrative and the inaudible textual components indicated the necessity to attend to vocalic textures and vibrations as together, the audience constituted the performative space and the sonorous envelope of the piece. In the construction of the following theoretical object, Alma Söderberg's *TRAVAIL,* I further my discussion of rhythm to consider how it might produce the space of sonic materiality. I also discuss how sound itself might be foregrounded as a potential event.

Sonic Materiality: Alma Söderberg's *TRAVAIL*

November 2013, I am at the Het Veem Theater in the Netherlands for *Nordwind*, a festival showcasing Nordic arts and culture. My eyes gradually adjust to the unlit studio space as the contours of a darkly clad figure standing a few metres away become perceptible. A tall outline with hair cut into a bob extends both arms directly in front of her at shoulder height. Almost immediately she begins to rhythmically shake two different sized objects in perfect synch, initiating a sonic event, altering the dynamics of the performative space and serving to soften the arrival sounds of other audience members. The regularised rattling of the two bean-filled percussion instruments generates a rhythm in the room. A common beat pervades, *tuning* my ears to the sound of the shakers and, in turn, to the sound of the space and to each other. A relentless pulsing momentum is present from the very beginning, lulling me into a collective rhythm, conditioning and enveloping the audience to the same inescapable beat. Background noise is actively brought into the foreground creating a staged common *milieu* for all our beings. This action is sustained throughout the opening ten minutes of the piece.

There is nothing else in the space except a barely discernible black table, a keyboard and a mixing desk positioned stage left. It seems that through both the visual (or lack of) and use of auditory demarcations, Söderberg is keen to make us listen to our listening.

Percussion instruments often relegated to the back of the orchestra occupy centre stage. In turn, the space is rhythmically scored, generating sensitivity to background noise. The background sound determines the boundary of our shared acoustic arena, carving a shape onto the space within the existing architecture of the studio, highlighting how it is neither exclusively *through* sound nor the constructed environment that relations are generated. Blesser claims that just as light sources are required to illuminate visual architecture, sound sources (sonic events) are required to "illuminate" aural architecture to make it aurally perceptible.[33] The force of the movement underscores sound's almost tangible presence, gently echoed in the vibrating plastic seats and audience feet or heads that tap or nod, momentarily holding us together. Söderberg is creating invisible ties to her and to each other, a reminder of the body's capacity to affect and be affected. Through the promulgation of an acoustic arena, a common rhythmical space emerges, made evident through my aural attention towards it, suspending and holding our temporary relation and establishing a structure of attention within the studio space.

Söderberg's figure, dressed in black, stands out against the lighter shade of the unlit white wall of the studio space. Just as Dimchev's white painted body, as previously discussed, stood out. Yet, distinct from the vibrational butoh-trained body hers has the cinematic quality of a projection. The neat, precise movements contribute to a machine-like illusion, inviting us to question her live presence. The intense repetition of movement demonstrates impeccably

[33] Blesser, *Spaces Speak*, p.22.

smooth transitions as her arms move from waist to thigh height and back again. The movement disrupts the *still* air in the room causing sound to extend from the inside of the object outwards, occupying space, rather than taking place. Söderberg's movement extends away from her, generating a sound that is at once de-centred and separated from its original source, causing a vibrational impact on the other bodies within the space as sound seems to involve us in a relation that Zuckerlandl describes as reaching 'from-out-there-toward-me-and-through-me'.[34] But more than this, I become accustomed and attuned to the beat's repetitive monotony as my body also moves, highlighting the space of hearing as a dynamic place of flows and altered relations.

This movement continues to underscore and condition a common background. The subtle changes in intensity and rhythm play on my sphere of attention, holding, then releasing as I search for meaning, or the potential for something more to happen (which never does). Söderberg is making me concentrate on the minutiae of my expressive being and its ability to register and sense, generating and carving a sonorous space within the physical boundaries of the room. As previously discussed in the work of Dimchev, this is achieved through attention brought to the affective force of rhythm, rather than through an understanding of its metronomic counting effect. We are bound and held together by an aural architecture with a dynamic distinct from the physical features of the space.

Light gradually illuminates the stage. It elicits a pink glow from a large copper coil shaped like the whorls of the inner ear lying seemingly inert. The light casts a reflection on the studio floor, giving the impression that the coil extends beyond its visual form. The beat and movement begin to slow down, yet they resist losing any vitality. In turn, I feel my heart rate

[34] Zuckerlandl, *Sound and Symbol*, p.368.

slow in unison with the rhythm marked by Söderberg's relentless but now calmer movement. The top of her shoulders and upper arm remain stiller than in the preceding sequence. This time, her forearms flick up to maintain the rhythm and momentum. My focus falls on her silhouetted bicep as it moves, continually working like a body-machine whose only effort is made visually manifest through the billowing of her loose-fitting shirt and the rhythmical nodding of her bob. As the movement continues without pause, it is unclear whether she is moving the shakers or they are moving her. The static notion of bodies and objects as mutually separate entities is challenged. The exchange appears inter-animated; the objects rely on the body to move them, yet the body also relies on the objects to move it; the rhythm switches back and forth as each holds the other in a continuous motion. In *Corpus*, Jean-Luc Nancy claims that bodies have no individual character outside of their mutual *touching*; the mass of one presses down on the other in a jostling motion whilst also remaining as individual, discrete entities.[35] According to Nancy, the limits of an object or body are defined in relation to something other than itself. Within the sonorous environment that Söderberg is creating in the studio space, the shakers and their inter-animation with Söderberg mutually affect each other. Equally, our presence as audience exerts a sense of weight or mutual weighing within the space. Söderberg is exposing how sound produces affective relations which operate on and between bodies, objects and sound; none are exclusive, presented instead as mutually entangled, contagious and somehow unavoidable. This was also evident in the work of Dimchev through an acknowledgement of the skin as a shared surface, one that put us in relation with and to each other, rather than one that separates.

In a determined moment, the movement stops. Söderberg strides around the perimeter of the space with large, purposeful steps. She is barefoot, a state made more apparent by the small

[35] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard S. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

bells dangling from the anklets she wears. Her arms, freed of the objects, hang at her sides. The room becomes still, yet is not silent. The absence of incessant movement leaves a dense atmosphere lingering and resounding in the space. The sound event hangs heavy in the room. As Nancy states:

> The sonorous […] outweighs form. It does not dissolve it, but rather enlarges it; it gives it an amplitude, a density, and a vibration or an undulation whose outline never does anything but approach.[36]

Here, sound is sensed almost as a palpable body, one that has outweighed and expanded beyond the confines of Söderberg's frame and the percussion instruments. Walking around the edge of the studio, Söderberg doesn't disrupt the atmosphere created, foregrounding the physical space occupied by sound's materiality. Vibrations continue to disperse across the space and through us, aurally drawing our attention to the space of the studio as the site of our attention.

From the corner of the back wall, stage right, Söderberg's unmediated voice projects an unvoiced plosive towards me across the space 'p – peo – ple – p - pe, p – peo - ple'. To accompany the sound, her hands manipulate the air in front of her forehead and chin as she opens and closes her palms, moulding the air as she places sounds onto it. The syllabic beat and sound of the word is emphasised, estranging its sense-making capacity yet emphasising the weight of its impact on the room. The sounds land like objects staged in the space between her mouth and my ears. The careful manipulation of air inside her mouth generates sound with a force. Söderberg rhythmically stimulates her vocal chords, generating a variety

[36] Nancy, *Listening*, p.2.

of sounds that resound outside of and beyond the apparent limits of her body. Her respiration acts as fuel, stoking her vocal apparatus and allowing it to repeat and maintain a constant motion. The individual yet distinctive sound of her wheezing breath emphasises the intake of air she repeatedly draws in from the room – one that we all share. Though solely a human sound, not projected through a microphone or altered by a loop pedal or other technological device, Söderberg's sound box demonstrates a range of various tones, pitches and intensities, alerting our attention to the affective tone of the words rather than their syntactical and symbolic significance. Söderberg's incessant movements and staged sounds have served to tune our attention to the sonorous contours of words and their impact on the space in the room and between us.

Söderberg moves stage left to a mixing desk. She selects a beat pattern, picks up the microphone and says, 'hello', directly addressing the audience for the first time. In a serious tone she says, 'body parts and bus stops, factories and flower pots, citizens in sneakers, philosophers and preachers'. Despite the nonsensical combination of words, her timbre adds weight and implicit seriousness to the phrases. The use of the microphone and mediatised beat add further legitimacy, making otherwise random ramblings sound more profound. She names and lists people and objects with no apparent connection or order. Small fragments of narrative emerge as short phrases which fail to amount to anything concrete. I find myself trying to make sense or forge links between the words and phrases. Here, Söderberg is playing with our tendency to make meaning and make sense, highlighting the shortfall in words and inadequacy of naming to account for events or experience. By bringing words and phrases into contact, they too jostle each other, albeit momentarily. I glimpse alternative linguistic combinations, allowing me to feel the force and potential plasticity of expression despite uncertainty of what is said. This touching between otherwise mutually exclusive

linguistic entities echoes to some extent what I experienced during the opening section of the piece between bodies, objects, movement and sound. Both seem to imply a co-constitutive arena of aural attention foregrounding the staging of the aural as event within the studio space.

A layer of dry ice has begun to drift in behind the audience. It fills the space from the ceiling floating in and above Söderberg, like a large grey cloud, visually occupying the air space that sound has lingered in throughout the piece. It hangs momentarily before gradually descending. She repeats the word 'reality' over and over, breaking down its syllables playing with various rhythms, and repeating the sound of the consonants 'r-r-r-r' before stratifying into the sentence 'reality is mute' as she turns off the pre-recorded beat that up to now had pervaded the whole space. She remains still as further smoke descends. This time Söderberg seems to be highlighting the space that sound has occupied until this moment. She allows us to grasp its presence as it outlines how the sensible organisation of space has been re-distributed. The voice and sound constantly filling and refilling our shared environment imperceptibly throughout the duration of the piece. The lights gradually fade out, yet sound persists. This is made further evident in the relentless pulsation of the small green and red LEDs on the mixing desk that continue to mark a beat, gently underscoring our common rhythm. The pre-recorded voice plays on within the system though now outside of audibility highlighting Voegelin's observation that 'sonic materiality is there, but we lack the sensibility, will, and wherewithal to hear it'.[37]

[37] Salomé Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), p. 170.

Sonorously and physically, Söderberg has conditioned and manipulated the atmosphere within the studio space using performance to draw attention to the content and construction of the background and its potential to envelop the audience, creating shared acoustic arenas that score and affect our relationship to the space and to each other. The performer's body is foregrounded as producer and catalyst of aural architecture, perpetrating connections to others, not only through words but also through movement, initiating shared waves of affect. Sound is not staged as an object to be perceived and understood but as a palpable spatial event evolving and altering over time. Minimalist staging combined with lengthy periods of exposure to a variety of sonorous atmospheres permit the experience of a lingering state within the aural qualities of the studio environment. This turns my attention to the materiality of sound and its potential to create sonorous environments within the space.

Conclusion

In summary, within this article sound has been considered as an invisible, material force that binds us together, generating emergent communities and stitching attentive bodies together across the studio space. Furthermore, sound has been staged as a palpable body with its own force, drawing attention to how we occupy and sense space sonorously using stillness, silence and rhythm to outline and stage what that space might be. The analysis of Ivo Dimchev's *Lili Handel* has suggested that our involvement with the performative space might be cultivated through a relation tied to vibrational sensations emerging from physical movements or from a bodily location. As an accumulative experience this might be felt as a sensation not dissimilar to touch grounded in an act of reaching *toward* each other. The use of the body and the rhythm of percussion instruments in Söderberg's *TRAVAIL* foregrounded the materiality of sound, fostering a collective attention to the expanding space of the sonorous, rendering it

almost palpable as it unfolds in time, adding and constituting itself as a dynamic in relation to other bodies and objects outside of built relations or physical architectural structures.

In cultivating attention to the sonorous production of space operating within two theoretical objects, I argue that sound as a felt materiality can create sonorous spaces and relations that, when attended to, endorse an aural experience that shifts beyond the physical architectural frame of the studio and generate a sense of meaning through the phenomenological experience of being there. In both theoretical objects, aural attention to the theatre event has solicited reciprocity from the audience, through a sensed vibration in the case of *Lili Handel,* and as a movement in the case of *TRAVAIL.* Common to both is an acknowledgement and recognition of the audience as a listening body. By focusing on how we hear, I argue that attention is brought to the immaterial, dynamic and non-measurable forces that constitute and contribute to the theatrical event.

The writing style I develop incorporates my subjective experience and enables attention to the shifts in tone and mood to be documented. This provides insight into the material conditions within which the piece takes place, evidencing how aural spatiality and sonic materiality are manipulated and navigated. Through writing, I articulate the distinctions between these areas of experience as they are felt within the auditorium. I bring out a criticality from within each of the works by articulating the rhythm and mood that unfolds in the space, as well as the shifting contours and textures that this provokes amongst the audience and in the space between the performer and the spectator. In doing so I articulate how feeling, mood and affect constitute and contribute to the experience of the event and our *living through* of this event *together*.

By constructing examples of contemporary performance practice as theoretical objects, I have attended to how aurality occupies space as a volume, can create and establish structures of attention made manifest by the aural intensity brought by audience members thereby bringing to the surface the depths of feeling and waves of affect that score the theatrical event as it occurs. In doing so I develop a theorisation of aural space influenced by tonality and structures of attention. I put forward a mode of attending that is sensitive to the process of the work as it unfolds in the moment of its taking place. This approach is marked by an openness towards the affective forces, subtlety of tone, mood and use of space sustained through a tension held between description and analysis. This begins to address the need for an embodied, phenomenological approach to our attending to sound in theatre and performance.